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Egypt: Towards an Algerian Scenario

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It is hard to watch the events unfolding in Egypt today without drawing a parallel with the Algerian situation in 1990. The images of demonstrations and clashes between Egyptian security forces and the Muslim Brotherhood are eerily reminiscent of those carried out by the Algerian People's National Army (APNA) against the Islamists and supporters of the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS). Will history repeat itself, in Egypt this time?

The armed conflict that took place in Algeria in the 1990s has root causes dating back to the 1980s, and even further, to the Algerian independence in 1962. During the 1980s, Algeria lived the "Berber Spring" (1980), followed by

riots in Constantine (1986) and finally the riots of October 5, 1988. During these riots, the people expressed their discontent with the political and socio-economic situation, as have the peoples fuelling the so-called "Arab Spring" since December 2010. Indeed, how can one not be reminded of the [Algerian youth of October 5 1988](#) in the streets of Didouche Mourad and la Grande Poste when seeing young Egyptians in Tahrir Square? Both yesterday's "*hittists*" (from the Arabic word for wall "*hit*", colloquial term describing young unemployed Algerians who lean against walls all day) or today's Egyptian "*aawatliya*" (unemployed), chose any representation of the government as their main target. Both groups expressed their dissatisfaction, their social and cultural suffocation, and their "mistrust" of leaders which they saw as "profiteers of the system" whose policies generated poverty, corruption and cronyism.

In Algeria, the events of October 1988 led to economic and political reforms, the most notable one being the adoption of a [multiparty system in the Constitution of 23 February 1989](#). Egypt's January 25 revolution led to the [removal of Hosni Mubarak](#) and the victory a year later of the Islamist Mohamed Morsi.

It goes without saying that Algeria is not Egypt. The Egyptian situation differs from that of Algeria in the 1990s in that the army's removal of Morsi followed massive popular protests that accused the elected president of highjacking Egypt's revolution. In Algeria, the disruption of the electoral process did not enjoy the same legitimacy given that the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) wasn't in power and was [seen as the "saviour" who would put an end to more than thirty years of National Liberation Front \(FLN\) rule](#).

However, these differences do not mean that there isn't a chance that the Egyptian situation could evolve similarly to the Algerian scenario of the 1990s: indeed, as was in Algeria, there is a "rupture" between the Army and the Islamist movement. The situation is especially concerning in Egypt because the Muslim Brotherhood had won the election fairly. Consequently, they consider that they are within their political rights and deem it their duty to fight for the power that was taken away from them.

The removal of the legitimately elected President Morsi is now deemed a catalyst of sustained violence. Hardliners within the Muslim Brotherhood are violently reclaiming what was forcefully taken away. It is important to recall that in Algeria, the disruption of the electoral process allowed the radical wing of the Islamist movement to strengthen its deep conviction that the only possible solution was to take up arms. In their eyes, a peaceful political process with the "*taghout*" [apostate] and "*moustabid*" [tyrant] would prove vain. The imposed end of the Algerian electoral process generated deep disappointment, resulted in a proliferation of armed jihadi groups, among them the GIA (Armed Islamic Group), and a [conflict lasting over 10 years ensued, accounting for 150,000 deaths and some 6000 missing](#).

The similarities between Algeria and Egypt don't stop there: the two armies' strategies in dealing with Islamists follow a similar pattern. Additionally, with the introduction of a curfew and the restoration of the emergency rule, one notes a particular choice of terminology. Egyptian authorities speak in the manner of their Algerian counterparts, by describing the protestors as "terrorists". In Algeria, the military spoke of an ["anti-terrorist" struggle and "total war against terrorism"](#); in Egypt, the army headed by [General Al-Sissi speaks of a "strong answer" in its "fight against terrorism"](#). The Algerian national public television network and part of the mass media, repeated the slogans "*we will defeat terrorism*" or "*all together against terrorism*" both in Arabic and in French. Currently in Egypt, private and public television channels depict a permanent banner reading "*Egypt*

fighting terrorism” in English and Arabic. This terminology was institutionalized on December 25, 2013 when the Egyptian government through his [vice-Prime Minister, Hossam Eissa](#), declared the Muslim Brotherhood and its political showcase FJP (Freedom and Justice Party) a “terrorist organization”. This indicates that members of the Muslim brotherhood are now under the anti-terrorist law promulgated in 1992 that can lead to the death penalty.

The repression of Egyptian security forces as well as the arbitrary executions and torture of prisoners are playing a key role in the escalation of violence in Egypt. By dint of intimidation and harassment, a significant number of Muslim brotherhood members and members of the Islamist movement in general, will be inclined to establish or join armed groups to satiate their thirst for vengeance. Sinai is witnessing the birth of various armed groups that are launching waves of attacks against security forces. That was the case on [October 7 2013, in the town of El-Tor](#) where a Police headquarters was attacked, killing 4 people and injuring more than 50. On the same day, an army convoy was attacked in [Ismailiya \(East of Cairo\), killing 6 soldiers](#). The latest attack targeted the Police Headquarters of [Daqahleya \(Mansoura\)](#) and led to the death of 15 people and injured more than a hundred.

A further similarity between the Egyptian and Algerian armies is illustrated by the fact that both demonstrated an underlying common political strategy. This consists of decimating the Muslim Brotherhood leadership, as proven by the arrest of the supreme guide, [Mohamed Badie](#). As in Algeria where FIS leaders such as [Hachani, Madani and Belhadj](#) were arrested, decimation of the Egyptian leadership implies a strengthening of party hardliners and Salafi groups already established in the Sinai desert, essentially harming those who are in favor of negotiations. Decimation of the leadership means creating an acephalous organization whilst eliminating the possibility of negotiating. With the dangerous presence of Al Qaeda in the Maghreb in general and in Egypt in particular ([with its branches Ansar al-Jiha and Ansar Beit al-Maqdis in Sinai](#)), the Muslim Brotherhood’s dissolution and its criminalization as a “terrorist group” is offering the most radical members a viable reason to go underground and engage in jihadism.

One thing is certain, by killing the “first” 800 Islamists in [Rabia’a Adawiya encampment in 19 August 2013](#), the Egyptian army offered the Muslim Brotherhood their first martyrs. It is difficult to foresee what will happen in the near future. The need to avoid a total radicalization of the Islamist Movement in Egypt and a unification of armed jihadi groups under one umbrella reminiscent of the GIA in Algeria in the 1990s seems crucial. The political actors need to find a peaceful and workable solution that can respect the will of all segments of Egyptian society including the Muslim Brotherhood. An “eradicator” solution as suggested by [General Amr: “We are 90 million Egyptians and there is only 3 million of Muslim Brothers. We need six months to liquidate or imprison all of them. This is not a problem: we have already done in the 1990s”](#) is inconceivable. It will lead to a civil war and Egypt, like Algeria, would live its “black decade”. A clean break with the past will prove difficult but by ending waves of arrests and violent repression, releasing President Morsi, decriminalizing the Muslim Brotherhood and giving it a legal and clear status, negotiations between the two parties could be conceivable.

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